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ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

DR. SYED MAHMUD

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# FOREWORD

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   Dr. Syed Mahmud (interviewee), recorded by

   Shri B.R. Nanda (interviewer), date, page,

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   Oral History Project.

<u>BIO-DATA</u>

Syed Mahmud; B. 1889; educ. Aligarh, Cambridge and Munster I.W. (Germany); General Secretary, Central Khilafat Committee (1921-36); General Secretary, A.I.C.C. (1923, 1929-36); Minister of Education and Development, Bihar (1937-39); Member, Congress Working Committee (1940-45); Minister of Development and Transport, Bihar (1946-52); Member, First Lok Sabha, Minister of External Affairs, Govt. of India (Dec. 1954 - April 1957); died, September 28, 1971.

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Main points covered in the interview

Early life; recollections of his brother-in-law, Mohammad Omar, and his Hindu friends and political activity at Benaras; atmosphere at Aligarh during student days (1904-05) and change in attitude vis-a-vis Hindus and the Congress; Prince of Wales's visit to Aligarh (1906); Gokhale's visit to Aligarh; students' strike at Aligarh; dispute between the trustees of the college and the English staff at Aligarh (1910); recollections of student days in England including the London branch of the Muslim League, the Indian Majlis, and his first meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru.

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Oral History Interview
with
Dr. Syed Mahmud
Delhi
August 6, 1966
by
Shri B.R. Nanda
for The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

Dr. Syed Mahmud: I was born in a village in Bihar. The name of the village was Bhimautri, the birthplace of Bhim; a very old and historical village it is. Bhimautri at present is known as Bhitri. In that village an historical battle was fought by the Huns. They invaded India. They were defeated by Skanda Gupta who erected a vast monument there which still exists - a pillar and in Pali language there are inscriptions. The village tradition was that anyone who could read that inscription, would get the treasure. Anyhow it has been read and these inscriptions have been published. They are known as the Bhitri inscriptions and a pillar of the same size and kind is in the Queen's College at Banaras. So this was the place where for the first time an outside invader was defeated. Even in the East India Company's time, no one could dig in the village beyond a certain limit, because generally treasures used to be found and it is said that East India Company's people had taken away in this manner the buried treasures, vast amounts of them from the village. This is the tradition. Now in my time too, when I was a child, people used to find small silver coins during the rainy season.

I was educated later on in Jaunpur and then I joined Normal School attached to Queen's College in Banaras.

There for the first time I came in contact with non-Muslim students and some of them became my fast friends. In Banaras I stayed with my brother-in-law, who was a well-known vakil. He was a leader in Banaras and was much respected. His Hindus friends, a number of them, used to come to his place every evening for two or three hours during all seasons. They would come, sit and talk. They were very orthodox people and would not drink even water under his roof. If they had to take water, they would go out. They would not eat pan unless it was given by a Hindu servant. Such was their orthodoxy. But the love which I saw between my brother and his friends struck me and that was my first experience as a very young boy of such friendship.

My brother-in-law, Mohammad Oomar was also a member of the Municipality from the Chowk Ward which was purely a Hindu ward. Once it so happened that a young Hindu gentleman, who was a graduate declared, "This time I will stand. Why should a Mussalman go from a Hindu ward?" The entire population of the city did not like this declaration and it was so angry that it pressurised my brother to stand for election to the Municipality. He himself wanted to retire because he had already served the Municipality for many years. "How dare that young man declare that you cannot stand from a Hindu ward?" they asked. He was compelled to stand for election. He defeated the young man with a vast majority, but after sometime he left it.

This was my first experience at an impressionable age of Hindu orthodoxy and with this experience I was

sent to Aligarh for higher eduction. Since then I have no complaint againt Hindu orthodoxy. Though there is so much orthodoxy even now at some places, I have no complaint at all and if I go to Banaras, anyone of these gentlemen, if he is living, I think, would not dine with me, but he will entertain me with so much love and affection that it is difficult to describe.

When I went to Aligarh about 60 years ago, I found that the Indian leaders were generally unaware of the conditions of students in the country. Of course, there was no incident of significance in the country, except the work of the Indian National Congress which used to meet once a year. They were armchair politicians' as they used to be called. But there in Aligarh I found the students quite unaware of even this little that was happening. Perhaps, jocularily I may say, they were unaware even of the fact that there were twenty-three crores of Hindus or more in the country. Principal Theodore Beck was dead and Sir Theodore Morison was our principal. He was an extremely good man, nice man. He was very fond of the students and the students were fond of him. It is true that he was an imperialist, but why should one blame him? He was an Englishman and he naturally wanted the British rule to continue in India. He was also regarded as a leader of Muslims. Anyhow such was the atmosphere. After two years or so some of us met together - Sir Mohammad Sherwani Hasham, who was also a student there then, Abdul Majid Khawaja, and Dr. Abdul Rahman of Bijnor, who, unfortunately,

died after he returned from Germany, and a few others; a dozen of us got together and we formed a secret society. We used to meet every week and one of us would read a paper on how to turn the British out of India and similar subjects. Within two or three years we were able to change theatmosphere in the old College to such on extent that by 1904 or 1905, it was difficult for anyone to speak against the Congress or against the Hindus in the Union Club. He was hooted if anyone did so. Even Sir Theodore Morison, whom the students loved and feared, realised this change. He left the College and went back to England. Of course, there were other reasons for his leaving Aligarh. John Morley, who later became Lord Morley, was a friend of his father, Carter Morison and he also had asked him to leave. But it was also a fact that he had found a change: a rapid change was coming at Aligarh. Anyhow, there were so many debates, so much discussion; but it is unnecessary for me to go into details.

In 1906, the then Prince of Wales, who later became King George V, came to India and paid a visit to Aligarh. The rooms of some of the students were selected for the Prince of Wales to see. My room was the first he visited. He came into the room. It was well decorated. He saw a picture of the German Emperor, William II. "You like him?" he asked. I said, "Yes, Your Royal Highness." In fact, they were cousins, and I knew that both Britain and Germany wer at loggerheads and were intriguing against each other. Then he saw a picture of the Sultan of Turkey. "Do you admire him?" he asked. I said, "Yes." "Why?" he asked. I said, "He is our Caliph." "Oh, he

is your Caliph." he said. Some talk in that way went on for a few minutes. Then the Principal W.A.J. Archbold changed the subject and drew his attention to a printed motto which was hanging on the wall. It said, "Do it now." "Is that your motto? Very good, very good," he said. Then he went away. But on his return to England, he is reported to have told John Morley that Aligarh would soon become a hot-bed of sedition. Somewhere it is mentioned in Morley's papers.

Then Gopal Krishna Gokhale was brought there by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Gokhale had come there for the first time. He was on a carriage, but the horse was taken out and the students themselves drew the carriage, with Gokhale in it, with great enthusiasm, shouting "Gokhale Zindabad! India Zindabad!" Such a shouting, great enthusiasm it was that when Gokhale got out from the carriage at Strachey Hall, there were tears rolling down his cheeks. He immediately said aloud, "Muhammad Ali, I shall now die a happy death. When I see young Mussalmans with so much enthusiasm for me and for India, little doubt remains in my heart that India will get freedom soon." Then he lectured for half an hour or an hour on education. Great enthusiasm prevailed. For every sentence he spoke, there was cheering. The British members of the college staff and the Principal were also there. They, of course, did not relish it.

After he had gone away, a few months later there was a big strike of the students. It started as a protest against the police but it turned out to be a political strike against the British staff and the British Government. The

tradition was that the students did not like to see the police in the College ■ compound and whenever there was some little incident and the police wanted to take action, Sir Theodore Morison always sided with the students and, therefore, nothing happened. But Principal Archbold was a new man. He did not know the tradition. He was an old man also. There was an incident in which a student was involved and the police were called in. Without enquiring about it, the Principal issued a notice turning out the student from the College. The students became angry at this and the trouble started from there. They were also affected by what was going on in 1904, 1905 and 1906 in Bengal. It had its effect on the Aligarh students too. So it turned out to be a political strike and lasted for five months. The students remained there but did not attend the college. Some of us were turned out: Abdul Rahman, Sherwani, Syud Hossain, myself and a few others. I remember later there was an enquiry committee. The Lieutenant-Governor of U.P., Sir J.P. Hewett, came there and something was settled, but naturally the British staff became very much dissatisifed.

Soon after I went to England. Sherwani followed afterwards and Abdul Rahman too. Syud Hossain went to Calcutta. From there he also went to England.

By 1910, two years afterwrds, there was a big dispute between the trustees of the College and the British staff. The Principal resigned and the trustees had the courage - at that time it was not easy for them - to accept that resignation.

Now there was a great wail of protest and articles were written in The Pioneer and other English papers that sedition had set in in Aligarh and a little later the entire British staff resigned. Their resignations were also accepted. So that is what it was like in those days. This in short is the history of my time at Aligarh.

Once just before the strike, all of us, members of the secret society, went to the grave of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and took an oath not to rest till we were able to turn the British out of India. There are so many incidents and so many things about my student life in Aligarh but this is enough here for the time being.

I just remember one or two incidents which are very interesting. I may mention them here also. In 1907, when Lala Lajpat Rai was deported to Mandalay, the Aligarh students were so furious that we went in deputation to Principal Archbold and demanded from him an explanation as to why Lala Lajpat Rai was deported. The Principal was furious and he held a meeting of the students at Strachey Hall and delivered a lecture. He was so furious that life in Aligarh had come to a stage when the students were asking for an explanation why a seditionist had been deported by the Government. From this incident one can judge the feelings of students and the atmosphere in Aligarh in those days.

In 1908, the first meeting of the Muslim League was to be held in Dacca. But no such meeting was actually

held. Practically, the first meeting of those days was held in Aligarh. All the Muslim leaders came from all over India. The students tried to hold a debate in order to give them a bit of their mind. We chose a subject which would be allowed by the Principal and the subject was "The hopes of the Indian Muslims are centred in the proposed All India Muslim League." The Principal liked the subject very much forgetting the other side of the picture. The subject was allowed to be discussed in a debate in the Union Club. When the debate was held, all the Muslim leaders gathered there. A student proposed the subject. The opposition against this subject was so vehement, that it was a scene worth seeing. It cannot be described.

Very vehement speeches were delivered and the speech of Dr. Syud Hossain, who was just Syud Hossain at that time, was worth listening. He was a very good speaker even in his student days. His English was extremely good. He could write and speak in English, nearly as well as his own ~~xxxxx~~ mother tongue. He made a vehement speech accusing the Muslim leaders for selling the country for a morsel, a few services and there was great shouting. All the leaders had to try and soothe our feelings saying that the Muslim community was not yet prepared to take this extreme step and Sir Mohamed Shafi, who was a High Court Judge of the Punjab or perhaps he had just retired, called ~~SH~~ Syud Hossain, a young Mohammedan. And Sir Mohamed Shafi and all the other leaders tried their best to dissuade the students but it was given out that we had revolted against their policy

and we would not rest now. The moment we were to go out of Aligarh, we would raise the banner of revolt against this policy. We could no longer bear it. When the voting took place, the leaders and the one student who proposed the subject were on one side and all the students against it on the other. It greatly embarrassed and puzzled the Muslim leaders of those days.

Next day, some of us were called to lunch and they tried to explain their positon, the position of the Muslims. Anyhow we were not at all satisfied and told them that it was not possible for us to understand it and whatever happened to the Muslim community, we did not care, whether they would get chances in the services or not, we would bear this policy or the British people should give up ruling India any longer. In fact, this debate was the turning point in the political history of the Muslims of India. Soon after this debate, Muslim leaders began to think seriously whether their reactionary policy would hold good any longer and within a few years, within five years, in fact, when the Muslim League held its session at Lucknow in 1913, Sir Mohammad Shafi presiding, the Muslim League's policy was changed and brought on level with that of the Congress of those days. Gokhale sent Mrs. Sarojini Naidu as a special messenger when it was known that the Muslim League's policy was going to be changed. She delivered, as she always did, a very fine speech, a moving speech, indeed.

In those days, Raja Mahendra Pratap was also a student in Aligarh. In fact, he was brought up in Aligarh and educated there from the first class. He was very quiet. He used

to attend the debates of the Union but never spoke. He was very attentive, when he listened to the debates. And after I had gone to England, he also left India and the rest of his life story everyone knows.

I was speaking about the debate in the Aligarh Students' Union in 1908. That debate, as I said, had a great effect on the Muslim leaders of those days. They apparently thought that young men were getting out of their hands and that they would revolt if they themselves did not change. In Aligarh itself, the change was rapidly taking place and the great change began with the exit of the British Principal. A little later, the entire British staff had differences with the Secretary of the College managing committee and they also resigned and their resignations were accepted. In those days it was very difficult for the Muslim community of Aligarh to accept the resignation of the entire British staff. Since then the Muslim of Aligarh came into disfavour of the British Government and the few posts in which the government service which they used to get previously, were more or less stopped. The change was coming over the Muslim community also and the younger men were fighting everywhere in India with the older men. Then the Minto-Morley reforms were brought in, though not introduced. These were being discussed very bitterly. The older men in Muslim community, who were in power, favoured separate electorates, while the younger men headed by Sir Ali Imam of Patna preached joint electorates.

In 1908, the Muslim League held a meeting at Amritsar, with Sir Ali Imam presiding. And for the first time

a Muslim from a Muslim platform preached joint electorates. Naturally, it was not liked by the people of the older generation who were sticking to their old policy and a ferment was going on all over India and the subject of discussion was separate or joint electorates. When conditions in the country were like that I left for England, followed by T.A.K. Sherwni, Syud Hossain and Abdul Rahman of Bijnor.

In London, a branch of the Muslim League was working under the charimanship of well-known Rt. Hon'ble Syed Amir Ali, who was then a member of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. A few of my friends, old Aligarhians were there and they persuaded me to become Joint Secretary of the League. I accepted. I used to come to London to attend the meetings of the Muslim League every month and, of course, a discussion on the question of separate or joint electorates started between a few of us and Syed Amir Ali.

Sir Ali Imam arrived in England to meet Sir John Morley, later on Lord Morley, and we invited him to Cambridge. There he spoke about the scope of the Reforms which was, of course, very limited, and, he, therefore, spoke in favour of joint electorates before the Cambridge Dons. This was published and my name was published too as one of the organisers and also it was mentioned that I was Joint Secretary of the London Muslim League. Syed Amir Ali was furious that his Muslim League was in any way associated with Sir Ali Imam's speech and he asked me to resign. I at once complied. And he wrote a letter

to the Muslim leaders in India complaining against me. Then I stuck to Cambridge. There I was also engaged in research for a thesis to be later on presented to a German university, and I used to go to London for different meetings.

Once the British Government sent their Blue Jackets to occupy Southern Persia. In those days British and Russians had decided to occupy Southern and Northern Persia respectively. We students of India held a meeting. Nearly two thousand Indian students from all over England attended the meeting. Asaf Ali, Sir Justice Suleiman and myself were the organisers and we persuaded Major Hasan Bilgrami to preside over the meeting. Ramsay MacDonald, the then leader of the Labour Party and many other MPs who were opposed to Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary at that time, also joined. That resolution was drafted by Prof. E.G. Brown of Cambridge whose sympathy for Persia was well known. We went to Wilfred Scawen Blunt to consult him. He was very angry saying that the resolution would not have any effect on the British Government. He said: "We must speak very plainly and in strong language, unless we did so, British Government would not take any notice of it." He drafted a resolution and asked us to propose it as an amendment. We did the same. There was a great hallo in the meeting. The Chairman Ramsay MacDonald, also asked us not to press them to leave the meeting because this resolution in their opinion would not do. Anyhow, we withdrew the resolution and the original

resolution was passed. Then under Blunt's advice, a telegram was proposed to be sent to the Sultan of Turkey, the King of Afghanistan and different Muslim potentates proposing them to help Persia. Next day the Times worte a note against the meeting and said that in their own metropolis, their own subjects and fellow-citizens carried on sedition against the government and it was keeping quiet. That meeting had a great effect. In India, it was followed by demonstrations leading to agitation. The Blue Jackets were soon withdrawn. This was a great achievemtn of Indian students in London in those day.

Similarly when Tripoli was attacked by Italians, it was known that behind it was Sir Edward Grey's policy and he did give his consent to it. The students held a very big meeting, presided over by Lord Lemington, former Governor of Bombay who had some sympathy with the Turkish Government. Tripoli was under Turkey. Anyhow the attack was treacherous. Prof. Brown was also there. Suddenly W.S. Blunt arrived at the meeting and there was a great uproar of cheering. Lord Lemington got frightened and got up to say that he hoped that Blunt would not speak very critically against the government. Anyhow Blunt said that the British government and the people should sympathise with the people of Tripoli and the Sultan of Turkey. The British government, he said, should send its Mediterranean Fleet to the area and make the Italians withdraw at once. He said that this attack was made at the instigation of Edward Grey and that the British Government were involved in it. There was great cheering for Blunt at the meeting. Nothing happened, of course. Italy

occupiedTripoli and it went on for a few years. They were fighting. Anwar Pashasomehow reached Tripoli and organised the resistance. Turkey could not send her army as it was not possible. Thus Tripoli was left to its own resources. The population organised themselves and kept on fighting with the Italians for some years. But they could not carry on the struggle for long.

So this is what we were doing. All this work was done on behalf of India in London. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also used to attend those meetings. We used to celebrate Diwali and Id festivals regularly at Cambridge, as well as in London. There I saw Jawaharlal Nehru several times. There was an Indian Majlis in Cambridge which, I understand, still exists. Pandit Nehru was a regualr visitor at the Majlis. He used to attend but I never heard him speak. Once a funny thing happened. B.C. Pal, the extremist leader of those days who was also living in London, was invited by the Majlis to speak. When he came, many professors and Dons of Cambridge attended, including the old Master of Trinity, Butler. He was a highly respected person not only in Cambridge but throughout England. Pal said that ICS officers cared very little for India and they had no sympathy for India. Then the old Master of Trinity, a very honest man, got up and very firmly repudiated the speaker and said, "My own nephew, when comes home, talks much of India that we get tired of it. He does not talk of anything but India. How do you say that ICS officers have no sympathy for India?" But he was wrong. Naturally they would talk of India in England, showing their glory and their rule, recalling all

those things. Pal was right. But in a way Butler was also right. He did not realise what their talk really meant. However, we went on.

I had never formally met Nehru in England. He had been there one or two years before me, I think. Then, on 14 November 1909, I was in Cambridge and he was there too. It was his birthday, but at that time I did not know that 14 November was his birthday. I was introduced to him by Nazir Hasan, who afterwards became Nawab Dr. Nazir Yar Jung of Hyderabad. He died recently, on 6 July 1966. That was my first meeting with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. It was his birthday and so perhaps that was the reason why he wore a new dress. Although many years have passed, I remember his grey suit even now with tie and socks to match as was the wont of Cambridge undergraduates those days. It was my first meeting with him. I recollect it very vividly and also little talk I had at that time, and his dress and his face are still fresh in my memory after so many years. In fact, I used to write a diary, (of course it was discontinued, not regular either.) and on that night I wrote about my meeting with him, just a few sentences and my relations with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru began from that day.

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